

The Programming Pirate of Pickle Lake, Ont.

How one believer in free enterprise has buffaloeed the bureaucrats

By Gordon Donaldson

It was two days before Christmas and 20 below zero when the television station arrived in Pickle Lake, 300 miles north of Thunder Bay.

Two men unloaded it from a small van, carried it up to a second floor apartment, and put it on the kitchen table. They rigged an antenna from the balcony and within three hours the Northern Access Network was on the air. The studio camera focused on its logo—a polar bear looking at a screen—then on the determined face of its founder, 32-year-old David Brough, who explained what he was going to do.

He was going to break the law. Pickle Lake, a copper-mining community of 900, had 200 TV sets but no TV, although the CBC had been promising service for two years. The miners had brought their sets with them when they arrived from other places blessed by television. They used them to play electronic "pong" games.

Since the movie house closed down, there wasn't much to do except drink at the two pubs, or listen to the interminable pongs.

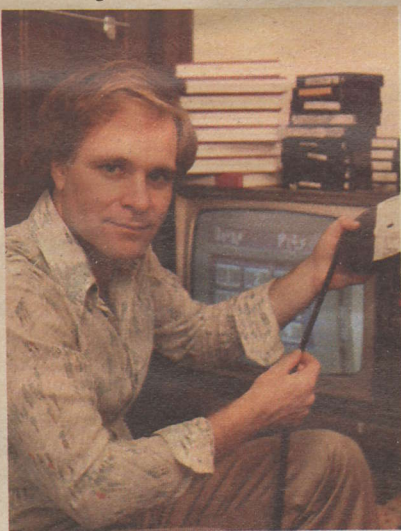
That was last Christmas. By summer David Brough was providing 43 hours of television per day on two color channels. He claims to have the best programs in North America, and he may not be too far off. He tape-records all the programs from TV sets in his bedroom in Toronto, where there is the best selection available. It's all done without the approval of the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, the Department of Communications, or anybody else.

Brough is a pirate, shunned by the

authorities who are supposed to provide TV service to places like Pickle Lake, but haven't found the time or the money to do it. He's also an idealist and a pioneer in the new field of "flea-powered" television. He spent three years hammering on government doors, trying to sell his scheme to bring ultra-cheap service to the North before going to Pickle Lake to prove that it works. A Department of Communications official threatened to throw him out a ninth-floor window. A CBC man wanted to punch him out. Entrepreneur idealists irritate.

He began as a teacher of retarded children in Orillia, Ont., and got into children's television as a puppeteer on the *Uncle Bobby Show* at CFTO, To- →

David Brough in his Toronto apartment





Pickle Lake—TV broke its boredom

ronto. He got into piracy because he wants to bring do-it-yourself TV to remote Indian and Inuit communities. Along the way he taught himself enough to modify existing equipment into a miniature TV station that cost \$6000. "It's a classic example of haywire ingenuity," says Israel "Sruki" Switzer, Canada's leading engineer of cable systems, who helped Brough with technical problems.

The Pickle Lake mining company bought the \$6000 system, which includes camera, videotape machine, transmitter mast and antenna, and paid Brough \$2000 a month for the service. While he was taping in Toronto, the station-in-the-kitchen was run by Marlin "Spike" Roy, a 21-year-old former telephone repairman, with the silent encouragement of his dog, Shane.

Roy read the local news, or invited school-children to read it for him, operated the camera when guests dropped into the studio, which is the living room, and shot "commercials" by pointing the camera at notices of local bargains or happenings pinned to the wall.

He also went out with a portable video-recorder to cover snowmobile races, broomball games, openings of new stores and whatever else the inhabitants of Pickle Lake were up to. While he was out, the transmitter broadcasted

automatically, for Brough modified his tape deck to play up to 10 hours at a stretch. In the early days it ran out after two hours, and Roy had to rush home before the station went off the air. It did go off once when Brough and Roy locked themselves out of the apartment and had to climb the balcony to get in.

Now the main problem is late arrivals of the tapes, which are flown in from Toronto. When TV GUIDE visited Spike Roy in his kitchen, the phone rang constantly as viewers demanded to know whether the new batch had arrived. And word spread along the dusty street: "No tapes yet. They missed the plane."

Pickle Lake is loyal to its station. When Department of Communications officials and police arrived to examine the apartment, angry miners emerged from bars and made threatening noises. The officials have not been back.

"TV is the best thing that ever happened to Pickle Lake," says Roy Slemko who runs the hotel and might be expected to complain that TV's bad for business. "It keeps the kids off the streets. There's nothing else to do here."

Last summer leaders of other small communities took a look at Pickle Lake, then phoned Brough. In August, he loaded two new units into his van and drove to Ignace (pop. 3000) and the →

Mattabi mine 40 miles outside Ignace, to start network stations Two and Three.

Brough is now planning to move into Sioux Lookout, Ear Falls and Red Lake, Ont. Meanwhile the CBC is moving into Pickle Lake, so Brough is converting to pay-TV. This puts him one more jump outside the law, inasmuch as the government is still deciding what form (if any) pay-TV should take. Brough didn't wait. He built his own "scrambler" and a decoding device that he'll lease to subscribers to unscramble the signal. His decoder costs \$8 to make—half the price of the cheapest model contemplated by Bell Telephone engineers. He hopes to put pay systems into places that have CBC service, offering alternative programming, and set up "free" systems in TV-less communities, providing he can get the community, or the government, to pay for them.

Canada is committed to provide television to all outposts of 500 or more people as soon as funds are available. The CBC is endeavoring to do this. The prophet of flea-power wants to take the job away from the corporation. He says he can set up 100 Pickle Lake-sized stations for the cost of one CBC satellite relay centre. And his stations will pro-

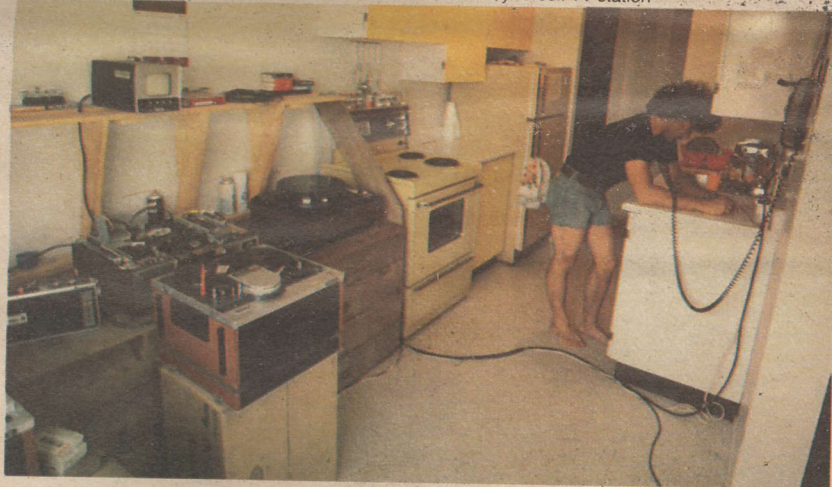
vide local programming as well as the tapes from Toronto.

"The native peoples need their own programs, which the CBC doesn't provide," he says. "That's the big complaint about CBC-TV in the North. You can build people's egos by showing them themselves and making them feel good about it. It's almost therapeutic. Everywhere I go I want to train some local person to operate the system. I spent three years trying to convince the Department of Indian Affairs, but they're paranoid about what I'm doing."

How long can David Brough last before someone arrests him or sues him?

Well, Indian Affairs can refuse him support, but can't knock him off the air. The CRTC can't lift his license because he doesn't have one. Because he is not broadcasting objectionable material, or interfering with anyone else's signal, the commission has been lenient. It sent back his application to broadcast in Pickle Lake on the grounds that he filled out the wrong form. However, Brough doesn't feel the CRTC is against him. "If they decide I'm not providing a public service and if the public doesn't want it, I'll pull out," he says. "But I don't think that'll happen." He is now applying →

Marlin "Spike" Roy operates kitchen studio of the new do-it-yourself TV station





Marlin Roy carts off the latest batch of tapes flown in from "pirate" base

for "over the air" cable licenses. If he gets one, it'll be a first.

His problem with the Department of Communications is that his TV transmitter doesn't meet the high technical standards demanded of big-city CBC and CTV stations. (His transmitter uses less power than a light bulb would to cover a radius of six miles.) Brough says it provides a picture as good as that of the average cable system. Government standards for cable are much lower than for over-the-air broadcasters, but he is a broadcaster.

Communications Minister Jeanne Sauve insists that Northern broadcasters must meet Southern standards, which would mean using \$100,000 cameras and video machines. Brough says this is ridiculous—the more sophisticated the equipment, the more maintenance that is required and the more likely it is to freeze up.

Then there's the matter of the pirated tapes. Cable operators make millions by carrying other people's programs, even

deleting their commercials and substituting new ones, but it's an infringement of copyright to tape shows and rebroadcast them.

However, people do it. Pirated tapes are fairly common in the North. Brough says he is trying to arrange a royalty scale that will enable him to pay his way. The North is not a commercial TV market, so he doesn't expect to pay too much. Northern audiences are too small to boost ratings and many of the goods advertised on Southern TV aren't available. Nobody really wants to take TV into the North except a few CBC enthusiasts—and David Brough.

"We wish him an awful lot of luck," said a CBC spokesman.

Brough is building better equipment. And recording more tapes. "I look forward to shipping the system all over the Third World," he declares. "They don't need expensive microwaves or satellites. We can 'bicycle' the tapes by bus."

Flea-power is on its way. Today Pickle Lake. Tomorrow the world. (END)